Historicizing a Text: *Viragaya* as a Postcolonial Novel

Liyanage Amarakeerthi

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Martin Wickramasinghe's *Viragaya* (1956), often treated as his masterpiece, is taken to be an ahistorical and apolitical novel that set the trend for a host of other apolitical novels to appear. The major proponent of this argument is Gunadasa Amarasekara. In this paper I want to problematize this argument and to make the case *Viragaya* can be read as a postcolonial novel and, as such it is quite political. I want to argue that once *Viragaya* is situated in postcolonial discourse/s the book begins to participate in an interesting discourse on the possible the ideal Sinhala citizen of postcolonial Sri Lanka. Aravinda, the central character of the book seems to represent Martin Wickramasinghe's hope, doubts and fears about the Sinhala Buddhist postcolonial citizen. In that sense *Viragaya*- a novel with minimal drama-, is much more social-political than his overtly social novels.

Basic Plotline

Aravinda is the son of a rural Arurvedic physician, who is open newness in society and wants his son to be a Western doctor. Aravinda, however, does not like to be a doctor and confesses to his mother that he does not like dissecting female bodies. Apart from that on his own admission he does not have desire to be a doctor or a scholar. This 'desirelessness', seen in him even in his school is developed into V*iragaya*- "desireless desire" the novel's thematic concept. During his high school years, Aravinda falls in love with Sarojini, a beautiful girl from a wealthy family in the village, but he does not make an attempt to marry his beloved even when he can. His plans for education collapse with his father's untimely death and he ends up becoming a government clerk with a considerably stable income but even then he does not agree with Sarojini's suggestion to get married without her parent's consent. He later interprets his inaction as an expression of 'desireless desire. When Sarojini suggests that they run off Aravinda does not agree with her- a decision costs him her girlfriend who marries a successful businessman who is incidentally Aravinda's cousin. Aravinda lives the rest of his life alone reading

extensively and doing alchemical experiments while working as a clerk in a government office. Towards his mid years, he hires a domestic servant who happens to be a helpless mother of a little daughter. The mother and daughter live in Aravinda's home practically like a family-though it is clear that Aravinda and the mother, or Aravinda and the daughter for that matter do not have any sexual relations. The little girl grows up as his adopted daughter for whom, as he later admits, Aravinda attractions that were almost sexual. Aravinda's life with these two women, though is a source of gossip, seems the ideal life he could have had. Aravinda dies rather young of a mysterious disease that has to do with blood leaving behind his autobiography. Other than the close examination of Aravinda's life the novel does not have any dramatic events- a point I will return to later in this paper.

Viragaya and the 'lack' of social significance

In 1976 Gunadasa Amarasekara wrote a slim book called *Abudassa Yugayak- or A Buddhaless Age* in which he presented a set of ideas that were made a great impact on Sinhala writers during the next 30 some years to come. This forty eight- page booklet is arguably the most influential piece of criticism on Sinhala novel after Ediriweera Saracchandra's *Modern Sinhalase Fiction* in 1946 and its Sinhala version *Sinhala Navakatha* in 1951. This booklet also launched the Jathika Chintana project of Amarasekara. I want to begin this paper with by summarizing a comment Amarasekara makes on the relationship between novel and society.

For Amarasekara, Martin Wickramasinghe's trilogy, *Gamaperaliya*(1944) *Kaliyugaya*(1956) and *Yuganthaya(*1949)[1] show that the novelist was engaging with "social dialogue" of the time while *Viragya* shows the stagnant or 'dialogue-less' nature of the time at which it was written. Amarasekara argues that when Wickramasinghe wrote his trilogy he was participating in two parallel social- discourses namely the nationalist discourse of Angarika Dharmapala and Marxist discourse. The first three decades of Sinhala novel was nurtured by the nationalist discourse of Anagarika Dhapmpala, and after that, a group of young people educated in England came back to initiate a Marxist

[1] Interestingly the second book of the trilogy was written last.

discourse and that discourse became too influenced Sinhala novel writing in the fourth and fifth decades of the twentieth century. Amarasekara goes on to explain how Marxist ideas shaped Wickramasinghe's views on social evolution. Yuganthaya, the last book of the trilogy imagines a socialist Sri Lanka (Amarasekara, 1996. p. 15-9). By 1956, however, Anagarika Dharmapala's nationalist discourse had reached its intended peak with Bandaranaike's coming to power (Amarasekara, 1996, p. 23.). After that victory both social discourses that animated Sri Lankan society and shaped novelists' perspectives and vision died down creating a period of intellectual stagnation or a period of silence and slowness. Though Amarasekara has a detailed and interesting explanation for this reality, I would avoid discussing them at this point.

Sri Lankan society's turning silent and slow is seen, according to Amarasekara by the fact that Aravinda, the main character of the book is introvert and he avoids any kind of this-worldly social engagement. Compared to the other heroes of Wickramasinghe's novels, Aravinda is a Bodhisattva who maintains an intentional distance from the life of other lay people. More importantly Aravinda does not have typical ambitions of other young men like him. Piyal the hero of *Gamaperaliya,* for example, is a typical hero of a novel who accepts the received norms of being 'successful' and makes an effort to achieve that success in worldly pursuits. He makes money and marries a woman from a family that is 'higher' than his. Importantly, he marries the woman he loves. Aravinda, the main character of *Viragaya* in contrast does not make any effort to win any of those. Even his romantic relationship with Sarojini was more or loess initiated by the girl herself. His is a distant love or 'non-attached attachment.' If the common characteristic of novelistic hero is to strive for success in worldly matters Aravinda is an anti-hero. His is a struggle with himself that takes place in isolation.

Gunadasa Amarasekara's explanation of this nature of *Viragaya* is interesting and important: By 1956, the year *Virayaga* was published a certain evolution of Sri Lankan society, depicted in Wickramasinghe's famous trilogy had come to an end. "This happens," Amarasekara argues, "when a novelist is unable to capture in his mind any forces that are growing and moving in a society or at a time when the movement of social

forces is too slow and too weak for the novelist to capture (Amarasekara, 1996. p. 28). Amarasekara concludes that *Viragaya* is a result of this motionless society.

When a society stops being evolved, Amararasekara also argues, its novelists tend to look into inner aspects of people living in that society. When large socio-political forces are in motion in a society the novelists can portray the characters' nature by describing outer-social forces and the characters' relation to those forces, but when those forces are no longer in motion the novelists have to look into the inner lives of the characters taking us in side the characters (Amarasekara, 1992. p. 29). Amarasekara's point seems correct about many novels: In a time of major political or social upheavals, characters participate in or react to those events and a writer can depict characters by describing the way they react those events.

Amarasekara does not criticize *Viragaya* for avoiding what he calls 'social-dialogue.' But he implies that *Viragaya*, though unwittingly, opened up space for series of other apolitical novels that aped *Viragaya*. He may be right about many novels such novels but some of them such as Siri Gunasinghe's *Hevanella*(Shadow) is neither a shadow of *Viragaya* nor an apolitical work. The fact that *Viragaya* signifies a lack of social dialogue seems the most problematic. Amarasekara's accusation results from the fact that he considers only 'political and social grand narratives' such as social evolutions or certain class struggles events as political. He ignores the political at the micro level and political in the personal. That was in part because he was influenced by early Marxist theories of socio-political analysis. In historizing *Viragaya* to get at its political one needs to be informed by later Marxist traditions which has a nuanced understanding modernist literature. Raymond Williams following statement seems to provide us with good guidance on this:

> "Moreover we should not, as socialists, make the extraordinary error of believing that the most people only become interesting when they begin to engage with political and industrial actions of a previously recognized kind. That error deserved Sartre's jibe that for many Marxists people are born only when they first enter capitalist employment. For if we are serious about even political life we have to enter that world in which people live as they can as themselves, and then necessarily live within a whole complex of work and love and illness and natural beauty. If we are serious socialists, we shall then often find within and cutting

> across this real substance- always, in its details, so surprising and often vivid- the profound social and historical conditions and movements which enable us to speak, with some fullness of voice, of a human history (Williams, 1989, p. 116.).

When read in a specific historical context Aravinda's love, fear, compassion and loneliness appear 'social' and 'political' but not the kind Amarasekara and others expected from novels of the middle of the 20th century. 1956 was a victorious year for Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, Martin Wickramasinghe himself was a celebrated supporter of SWRD Bandaranaike's coming to power in that year. But Wickramasinghe the novelist may have wanted to imagine and examine the inner makeup of Sinhala Buddhist person- an examination that is quite political at a time when Sinhala Buddhist nationalism has gained the most significant political victory in postcolonial Sri Lanka. For many Sinahala Buddhists the election victory of 1956 was more important than the independence from the colonial rule eight years earlier, and it was the most important post-colonial political event. In this paper, I want to argue that *Viragaya* is a very *political* novel if we understand it as a postcolonial text**.**

Postcolonial moments in the novel

Viragaya is a text that consciously attempts to understand the postcolonial Sinhala person, and in the process the novelist criticizes some aspects of this person and admires some other aspects, and even warns us against some other characteristics. The fact that the novelist investigates into this person is seen by the fact that novelist's alter ego, Sammy comes to Ginpataliya the native village of Aravinda to find out the latter's whereabouts. Sammy the narrator of the 'framing narrative' is like an investigator searching into Aravinda. Like the framing narrative of *The Heart of Darkness*, the outer frame of *Viragaya* too immediately prepares for a journey into one man's soul. With this character, we readers are also invited to participate in the investigation. This is how Sammy describes Aravinda:

> "I have known scholars, pundits, writers, intellectuals, metaphysicians, astrologers, exorcists, holy men. I never really could place Aravinda Jayasena, however. I had spent many hours talking to him, arguing with him. Despite all this I found myself quite incapable of fathoming his personality. Sometimes he would argue like an intellectual; at other times he would cling to quite irrational

> ideas; and yet again he would seem to be a slave to the most immature and sentimental impulses (P. 3)

Sammy- a character Wickramasinghe often uses as his alter-ego or as an disinterested observer or an examiner of other characters- seems to be a representative of modern scienctific man. What Sammy does at the opening of the novel is to get the reader into a kind of objectivist investigative mode to understand Aravinda, the subject. Then, we are given a chance to read Aravinda's autobiography. Autobiography is in a way a confession- a dream or a fantasy and therefore we are invited to psycho-analyze Aravinda.

When Sammy comes to Aravinda's village to **look for** him, Aravinda is dead and since the novel was published in 1956, one can argue that Aravinda died around that time. What we read, along with Sammy, is Aravinda's autobiography and, therefore, instead of looking for him we get to *look into him*. This is exactly what happens in *The Heart of Darkness* – a one of the most important texts often read as a postcolonial one. The structural resemblance between the two texts may be accidental but both novels have formal tools that are fitting and necessary for the kind of investigations the books have chosen to engage in.

In historicizing *Viragaya*, we must ask ourselves why the author wants to 'psycho-analyze' a character like Aravinda in the middle of the 20th century. My contention is that Wickramasinghe wanted to closely look into the inner makeup of the Sinhala Buddhist modern citizen who is inevitably a product of many influences.

Author is meticulous about showing that Aravinda is a product of two traditions: Eastern and Western. This is how Sammy the narrator of the framing narrative describes the belongings of Aravinda, which are now stored in a room after their owner's death:

> "English, Sanskrit and Pali books, some bound in leather, some in cloth, languished in the cupboard, deprived of the care of the enigmatic scholar who had handles them so often. As I read the titles of the books on chemistry, Buddhist metaphysics, occultism, magic, and psychic research, it occurred to me that I had not been far wrong in my original evaluation of Aravinda's mind. A bronze stature of the Buddha stood on a little table. Near it was a pile of ola-leaf manuscripts. I turned up one of them and tried to read a leaf. Apparently it was

> about the kind of magic and the occult practices that the Buddha called the absurd science. The statue seemed to preside over the ola-leaf manuscripts and books (p. 07).

Objects described in this paragraph are signs of the nature of their owner, and author says in the next paragraph "The room was a veritable museum, and looked like a memorial to the inner life of the dead Aravinda (p.7)".

From his boyhood Aravinda was exposed to two traditions: native and the Western. The native influence i.e. Sinhala Buddhist influence, however on him appears much more stronger. To understand Aravinda's sources of influence the novel must be put into a historical context. Unlike in Wickramasinghe's other novels such as *Gamperaliya*, the time period of *Viragaya* is not directly or indirectly given and any major political or other social events are not mentioned. Wicrkamasinge may have wanted this book to be an abstract metaphor for modern 'Sinhala person' that is not bound to any specific time period. That is how at least the book has been read. In this paper, I want to situate the book in a specific time period and to show that such periodization helps us to read the book as a postcolonial text.

The first paragraph of the first chapter of his autobiography, Aravinda says, " Father had a great reputation as a physician in our part of the country. The villagers were full of praise for him, and they often brought him gifts when they came to see him. But father was usually very taciturn in company. When I recall him as he was in those days- he died soon after I passed the English Senior Examination- I realize that I hardly ever saw him smile"(p. 10). One crucial piece of information in this paragraph is "English senior examination" which is a part of colonial education. This is not the only 'sign of historicity' in the first chapter, there are other such signs: Aravinda's father knows Pali, Sanskrit and English. He sends Aravinda to an English school and wants to make him a doctor because he thinks that Western medicine is "superior" to Eastern medicine. Aravinda's coming of age (or failing to come of age) takes place at a time when two different traditions intersect making him attracted to both. Here is Aravinda's description of his education English medium school and his own curiosities generated by that education.

> "Chemistry was as much an occult science to me then as magic and alchemy—I saw little difference between them. I have a dim notion that by the exploration of one or the other of these arts I could acquire the power of performing prodigies, and dicover the key to all the secrets of the universe. Explosives and fireworks were marvelous inventions. Chemistry, alchemy, magic—to my mind the words were lumps of salt out of the same sack. I has heard well-read people, and sometimes even my father, say that modern science was as worthy of study as the Abhidharma. Of course, my father wanted me to study chemistry only because he thought it a certain path to a high government job. I was attracted to it for a very different reason. I thought that it would unravel for me the mysteries of the universe"(p. 26)

In the same description, Aravinda reveals that though he read science fiction and he was 'second on the class in science' he avoided studying science textbooks and he his own experiments on chemical reactions learning formulas from books like "The Marvels of Chemistry"(p. 26). Aravinda continues these experiments even after his formal schooling, and once a huge explosions occurs injuring him- an incident that was crucial for Aravinda's leaving his ancestral home for his sister prohibits him doing such experiments fearing that they would harm her young son. Western science, introduced to Sri Lanka through the colonial contact, effectively drives Aravinda into a life of his own, and a job as clerk,- a position came into being with the colonial administrative structure, helps him support himself to live an independent life. Aravinda's internal dualities have their origin in the colonial/postcolonial society he grows up in.

Another sign of that history that appears in the first chapter is the father's wedding photo in which the father is dressed in a "some kind of a fancy-dress" –as Aravinda sees it: "He wore trousers, but with a cloth draped over them. He had a frock-coat reaching to his knees, he had a tie, socks, and shoes-"(p. 15). This dress was common among upper middle class people during the colonial times. It is important to note here that to Aravinda this dress of his father "[looks] very odd" (p.15).[2]

That fact that Aravinda finds his father's wedding dress to be odd is very significant when we view this text as a postcolonial one. Describing the photo Arvavinda says further, "Mother stood behind him. She wore long gown and gloves, and carried a fan.

[2] I am still trying find out exactly when this dress came into existence.

Even village people who saw this photograph *today* would imagine that she was dressed up to *act in a play or something like that*"(p.15). [3]

In this description the word "*today*" establishes the postcolonial moment in the text. It is further strengthened by another important expression: "to act in a play." To Aravinda the dress in the photo seems not real, fake or play. These expressions make it clear that direct colonial influence on peoples' life has now passed. *Today* or the 'present' of narrative indicates a period in time immediately prior to the independence in 1948 or after. Aravinda's gaze at the photograph is a postcolonial one and the moment such dress codes were in vogue has now passed. In the early period of colonial contact, rural middle classes were a bit hesitant to accept Western dresses right away. The cloth draped over the trousers like a sarong over pants signifies that hesitance. By the time of Aravinda, the fusion or confusion of two cultures was over.

Wickramasinghe is great in the way he registers the historicity of the novel by describing two wedding photographs. Here is the other photo:

> "On the opposite wall was my sister's wedding photograph. This was very different. My sister was wearing a saree and a blouse, ad she carried a bouquet of flowers, her husband was simply dressed in coat and trousers. In fact my sister would look like any bride of today if it were not for her chalky face and affected droop of the head.(p.15)."

The rest of the chapter makes it clear that Aravinda, the schoolboy is struggling to resolve a conflict in him.

Aravinda's 'detached desire' or desireless desire(Viragaya) is the main characteristic distinguishing him from other characters in the novel. The central event that dramatizes this "viragaya mentality" is the fact that Aravinda loves Sarojini without making an effort to 'own' her by marrying her. Other than that event- in this novel of minimal drama- there is no other real event to represent Aravinda's *viragaya*. Aravinda's attitude towards education and its use for social mobility too can be read as another expression of viragaya. Even though Aravinda is good at his studies he has no ambition to rise up in society. He is curious about everything in the world but for him education is not a tool to get rich, powerful and so on. This mental disposition is a complex one compared to the

[3] Emphasis is mine.

nature of many others in the novel. His curiosity of science is mediated by a detachedness of Buddhist ideals.

Another fact signifying his 'viragaya' is his generosity towards people around him. His sister practically steals the house that should belong him, but he gives it away with Bodhisattva- like indifference and grace. He helps out his household servant and her daughter, Bathee as if they were his own family. As a clerk in government clerical service Aravinda's income is more than enough for his expenses and he spends that money at first to educate Bathee and then to marry her off. He buys a her car and gives a cash-dowry – an act that angers Aravinda's miserly sister who accuses him of spending money on people who are not related to him. Aravinda argues that it was his responsibility to help Bathee and her mother who have been taking care of him.

The focus on this unique character, Aravinda, is Martin Wickramasinghe's meditation on one of the key possible characteristics of the postcolonial Sinhala person. A statement Wickramasinge made nine years after the publication of *Viragaya*, which had then become the most talked about Sinhala novel ever, highlights the postcolonial significance of the novel.

> "Buddhist environment and village culture, which was changed by some moral codes of Western culture, shaped Aravinda's mind, and his mind was like a container that accepts any wrong belief (avicara matayakak). His soul is close to the soul of someone who thinned out 'I-ness.' The codes of moral conduct related to monastic life and some moral codes or 'good customs' of the West were hypocrisies that destroy the household life and its comfort of the villagers. Those hypocrisies were confusing (sankara) model codes that discipline Buddhists according the model conducts of monks. That was not a Buddhist moral code. The Buddha did not teach a lay moral code that never changes…The majority of those lay people, who live paying lip service to monastic modes codes which doe not belong in the Buddhist lay culture, are hypocrites. Those who try to live without being hypocrites live like ones who have been exiled from the Buddhist society. The society shaped by a mixed culture is the one that treats people like Aravinda as fools, hypocrites, weaklings and losers. That culture is devoid of the core meanings of both Western and Buddhist cultures (Wickramasinghe, 1992, p. 99).

This paragraph shows that more than any other critic Wickramasinghe himself knew the postcolonial potentials of his novel. When no other could see the postcolonial meanings of the novel, Wickramasinghe himself had to step in to remind us that Aravinda was a

historical creation rather than universal and trans-historical representative of the ideal person.

To Marry or not to Marry

As above quote suggests Wickramasinghe does not uncritically endorse Aravinda. While he respects Aravinda's Bodhisattva-like qualities he criticizes Aravinda's uncritical acceptance of codes of ethics that were meant for monks rather than for lay people. The invasion of monastic ethics into the domain of secular lay life is subjected to the author's critical scrutiny. In many other essays Wickramasinghe reminds Sinhala people the need of keeping monastic ethics at bay, implying that unchecked acceptance of those moral codes would lead to hypocrisy than to ideal personhood. At the same time, Western morality is not devoid of hypocrisy for Wickramasinghe.

It is not clear in *Viragaya*, how, Western morality, Victorian ethics for example, intervenes the life of Aravinda and others. One may argue, however, that the ideas of monogamous marriage, which is a recurring trope in the novel, signifies Western moral codes of sexuality. At the beginning of the novel, for example, we see Aravinda reflecting on his parents' wedding photos. Then, his gaze moves onto the wedding photo of his sister. The key drama of the novel also revolves around marriage. That is the 'marriage' of Sarojini and Aravinda. That conflict is resolved with Siridasa and Sarojini's marriage. Aravinda is rejected by society and he is gossiped about because he is *not married* and he lives with women who are not married to him. In a way, Aravinda's isolation results from his rejection of marriage. The codes of ethics around rural marriage and sexuality are shaped not only by monastic morality but also by Western morality. Aravinda's living with two women who were not his blood relations generates suspicion about his sexuality. That is why Bathee, almost his adopted daughter and much younger than him, is a cause of so much whispering because many villagers do not understand or tolerate any other heterosexual relationship beyond marriage. Aravinda himself seems to accept these norms and monastic sexual codes without much resistance. His confessions invite us to closely understand the effects of this morality on him.

Moreover, the novel's next big dramatic event is also centered around marriage for Aravinda inaction and indecision return when Bathee falls in love with a driver:

> "What was I to do? I ought to throw both Bathee and her mother out of the house. Or I should at least get rid of Bathee or if that too wouldn't do I ought to get her married off to this young man with whom she was in love.
> But I did not have courage to do any of these things. To send her away after bringing her up for eight years, would be a vile thing to do. And her mother, who has seen everything about the house for so long now—how could I throw her out either? And how could I give Bathee to some ruffian of a driver."(P. 119)

Even though his own loneliness or single life results from the fact that he did not marry the girl he loves, Aravinda fails to understand that Bathee's happiness might depend on marrying her boyfriend. Aravinda's initial reaction to this relationship is quite conventional. He accuses both Bathee and her lover for falling in love without proper plans for getting married.

For Aravinda's generation, however, 'purely indigenous' married life has been changed by the country's contact with the West. Married life, the central narrative locus in which *Viragaya*'s thematic drama takes place, is a postcolonial one, and that fact is seen in the way Aravinda comments on family life:

> "Our country husbands and wives regard the use of words like "darling," "my treasure," "my life," "beloved," to be as bad as kissing or embracing in public. They do not believe in making a parade of intimacy, and their relationships are inward and inarticulate. This was how father and mother, too, lived"(p. 52).

Viragaya's 'marriage scenes' are not only central to the novel's theme but also they mark the postcoloniality of the text. The customs, ethics and laws about marriage in the novel are very much a product of two traditions. Compared to relatively loose pre-colonial marriage customs and laws described by European visitors and colonial administrators[4] 'love' and 'marriage' in *Viragaya* have been clearly shaped by the colonial contact. If you were to accept at least some of the account produced by, Johann Wolgang Heydt, a German worked for the Dutch East India Company in 1771, we can see that marriage has not been a 'big deal' to be big enough to animate thematics of a novel:

> "When (the people of Ceylon) marry they make little ado about it… As soon as the parents have arranged it, the bridegroom must send a petticoat of quite low value to the bride or himself take it…"(quoted in Peiris, 1962, p. 7).

[4] Queroz, Knox, D'oilly, Davy, Yalman(a long footnote to be added; I am still working on this area)

Many accounts of pre-colonial marriage customs in Sri Lanka suggests that, at least in rural areas and lower social strata, marriage and handling sexuality were indeed done without much ado. But by the time of Aravinda, which I would date to the early 20th century, marriage has turned into a big deal with several new norms and laws coming in. On this, however, my research still needs some work.

Apart from the sexual morality associated with marriage, the economies of 'marriage' influenced by the West are key to understand the central drama of *Viragaya*. Aravinda looses the ancestral house, which should be his according to the tradition, to his brother in law because of the kind of wedding Aravinda's father wants to have a for his daughter: "He had spent lavishly on Menaka's wedding."(p. 70). So, a marriage and its economy cost a family their house. This wedding is very different from the bridegroom sending a " petticoat of quite low value to the bride": "The local personages who came to the wedding were feasted sumptuously—this was just the sort of thing he took delight in doing. Later, he would preen himself proudly when he told some friend or relation, "Ratnajeeva vasala Mudali and District Judge Yatisena sid me the honour of coming to the wedding." We regarded Ratnajeeva Mudali and the District judge with almost as much respect as if they were royal visitors (p. 71). As Aravinda explains it, "for five days before the wedding father threw himself into an orgy of spending" and "at least twenty people had to be fed at every meal during those hectic days." The bride's dress,- "quite new style," was done by Ilangaranga vasala Mudali's daughters who had ruined themselves economically by 'wastefully' imitating lavish Western ways"(p.71).

The 'bankruptcy of the Ilangaranga family by imitating Western ways' in fact foreshadows what is to happen to Aravinda's family for the wedding makes Aravinda's father also indebt. To pay back his debts, he borrows money from his son in law writing the house off to him by a deed since he could not ever repay that money. Thus, Menaka and Dharmadasa come to own the house, which traditionally should be Aravinda's, leading Aravinda to a life of his own. And with this unexpected turn of events Aravinda's mother who does not like living in 'somebody else's house' is disappointed that her husband did not make any plans for her own future and returns to her ancestral village. This is another factor making Aravinda's solitary life possible. The economies of

modern wedding, with a several colonial elements in it, is quite significant in creating the causality of the novel and portraying Aravinda's character.

Importance of being a clerk

The adult Aravinda's independence and detachment from the rest of the village is made possible by his postcolonial job. The position of clerk is a product of colonial an administrative structure. Aravinda's economic independence is made possible by his connection to that structure, which is outside of the village and its traditional economic structures. The novel does not give us any information as to how Aravinda worked as a clerk and no scene at his office is described. His 'office' figures in the novel only as his salary, which is mentioned several times.[5] In addition, the person Aravinda chooses as his mentor and the discussion partner on the stuff 'beyond-everyday' such as the meaning of life, is also a postmaster which is a position in the colonial administrative structure and very influential rural jobs in the early decades of the twentieth century. Even though Aravinda does not like to be a Western physician he spends his adult life as a government clerk. One can argue that colonial education, in its original plan at least, aimed to produce second level administrators such as clerks. For Aravinda's 'detached life' is made possible mainly by his job as a clerk.

When his sister and her husbands end up owning the ancestral house, Aravinda has no hesitation leave it to live in a house of his own. That is one of the few places where he breaks free of his characteristic 'inaction.' This action was possible for his stable income as a clerk: he was making Rs 80 a month. His economic independent was not caused just by his 'Bodhisattva was of life' but by his job in Ceylon Clerical service.

To historicize Aravinda's independent thinking, I wanted to look into the history clerical crevice in Ceylon/Sri Lanka and the ways it changed the lives of young men in the country at the beginning of colonial modernity. Though there is hardly any research on this subject, what I have found so far is fascinating: A report by a committee a appointed to improve the clerical service in 1899 states that the system of admission to the service is the "fairest", which is an exam for which the "specimen papers come from England. Arithmetic and English were among the subjects required. Once one is admitted

[5] I am still to do some research on Ceylon Clerical Service.

to the service "merit and seniority" are the only criteria for promotions. Let me quote a paragraph from the report which throws some lights on how people like Aravinda was historically created in rural Sri Lanka:

> "It will be observed that we have fixed the initial salary of a passed candidate as RS.500 we consider this sufficient for a lad commencing life, who should have no embarrassing ties, and will the proposed incremental system have assured prospect of rising to a moderate competence within a definite period ("Report of the select committee on the scheme for the improvement of the clerical service". 1899, p. 39).

According to the new proposals a "diligent clerk of will rise to a salary Rs. 1100 in nine years"(p.40). Aravinda is such 'a lad commencing life,' he too did not have "embarrassing ties" in his life. The Ceylon Clerical Service has an elaborate system of grades, a fact clear from this report, and Aravinda can be assumed to be at one of the lower grades.

Viragaya is a novel that does not include any major political event or political ideas in the background or in the narrative, and anyone in the novel does not 'talk politics' either. This 'political sciences' is quite interesting and peculiar considering time the novel was written and the times in which the novel sets. However, the novel is read as a postcolonial text it begins to speaks to the 'political' in a very different sense of the term and that 'political' is perhaps much more important since it intervenes in the discourse on postcolonial Sinhala person and his or her possible forms. The novel provides a paradigm to reflect on possible dilemmas, failures and virtues of ideal person in postcolonial Sri Lanka.

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